

## SUSTAINING INTANGIBLE HERITAGE THROUGH "ADAPTIVE AUTHENTICITY": A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND APPLICATION IN NANJING BAIJU OPERA

*PRESERVAÇÃO DO PATRIMÔNIO IMATERIAL POR MEIO DA "AUTENTICIDADE ADAPTATIVA": UMA ESTRUTURA TEÓRICA E APLICAÇÃO NA ÓPERA BAIJU DE NANJING*

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### Abstract

This article proposes the theoretical framework of "adaptive authenticity" and demonstrates its utility through a secondary analysis of the modernization of Nanjing Baiju Opera. The model posits that the sustainability of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) is achieved not by choosing between preservation and innovation, but by safeguarding an inviolable core - the essential musical, narrative, and timbral signifiers while strategically adapting peripheral elements like rhythm, instrumentation, and staging. Applying this framework to the documented evolution from Xian Hua Diao (Fresh Flower Tune or Flower-drum Opera) to Mo Li Hua (Jasmine Flower) and its intergenerational reception data, the study shows how targeted adaptations enhance accessibility for younger audiences without compromising cultural identity. Findings reveal that modern listeners perceive such adaptations as authentic when the core remains intact. The adaptive authenticity model thus advances theoretical debates on heritage by reconciling preservation with modernization and offers practical, sustainable strategies for ensuring traditional arts endure as living practices.

**Keywords:** Adaptive Authenticity. Nanjing Baiju Opera. Intangible Cultural Heritage. Musical Analysis. Modernization.

### Resumo

*Este artigo propõe o arcabouço teórico da "autenticidade adaptativa" e demonstra sua utilidade por meio de uma análise secundária da modernização da Ópera Baiju de Nanjing. O modelo postula que a sustentabilidade do patrimônio cultural imaterial (PCI) é alcançada não pela escolha entre preservação e inovação, mas pela salvaguarda de um núcleo inviolável – os significantes musicais, narrativos e tímbrals essenciais – enquanto elementos periféricos como ritmo, instrumentação e encenação são adaptados estrategicamente. Aplicando esse arcabouço à evolução documentada de Xian Hua Diao (Ópera da Flor Fresca ou Ópera do Tambor de Flor) para Mo Li Hua (Ópera da Flor de Jasmim) e seus dados de recepção intergeracional, o estudo mostra como adaptações direcionadas aumentam a acessibilidade para o público mais jovem sem comprometer a identidade cultural. Os resultados revelam que os ouvintes modernos percebem tais adaptações como autênticas quando o núcleo permanece intacto. O modelo de autenticidade adaptativa, portanto, avança os debates teóricos sobre patrimônio ao conciliar preservação com modernização e oferece estratégias práticas e sustentáveis para garantir que as artes tradicionais perdurem como práticas vivas.*

**Palavras-chave:** Autenticidade Adaptativa. Ópera Baiju de Nanjing. Patrimônio Cultural Imaterial. Análise Musical. Modernização.



## 1 INTRODUCTION

The preservation of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) in the 21st century faces a universal dilemma: how can traditional art forms withstand the constraints of globalization and altering audience tastes without losing their core character? Regional performing arts often struggle due to their lack of institutional support and global recognition compared to their national counterparts. The dominant narrative often presents this issue as a dichotomy between stringent preservation, which may lead to obsolescence, and extreme modernization, which endangers authenticity. This dichotomy provides minimal practical direction for practitioners and policymakers in pursuit of sustainable pathways.

Nanjing Baiju Opera, a centuries-old art form originating from the silk-working communities of Jiangnan, represents a significant case study in this global discourse. The historical trajectory, characterized by phases of significant success and near-extinction, illustrates the susceptibility of traditional arts to socio-political turmoil. More recently, its revival efforts, including musical adaptations like the transformation of the folk tune "Xian Hua Diao" (Fresh Flower Tune or Flower-drum Opera), into the widely known "Mo Li Hua," (Jasmine Flower) highlight the active negotiation between tradition and modernity. While existing scholarship, such as the work of Gibbs (2018) and Mackerras (2013, 1999), has effectively documented these tensions in Chinese performing arts broadly, a significant gap remains in understanding the mechanisms that enable successful adaptation. While Wu & Mohammed (2024) have meticulously documented the musical and receptional changes in Nanjing Baiju, their study lacks a unifying theoretical framework to explain why these specific adaptations succeeded where others may fail. This study addresses that gap by proposing and applying the novel framework of 'Adaptive Authenticity' to reinterpret their findings, moving from description to an explanatory model with broader applicability. The question is not merely *if* change occurs, but *how* it can be managed strategically to ensure both cultural continuity and contemporary relevance.

This study aims to fill this gap by proposing and applying a new conceptual framework: "Adaptive Authenticity." We argue that the sustainability of ICH is not achieved by choosing between preservation and innovation but through a conscious, strategic process where core cultural signifiers (the "authentic" essence) are meticulously

safeguarded, while peripheral elements are deliberately adapted for modern appeal. This paper moves beyond descriptive analysis to investigate the following research questions:

1. How can the concept of "Adaptive Authenticity" be defined and operationalized in the context of traditional music adaptation?
2. What constitutes the "core" and "periphery" in the musical structure of Nanjing Baiju Opera, as evidenced by the evolution of its repertoire?
3. How does this strategic adaptation influence audience reception across different generations?

By answering these questions, this research contributes a novel theoretical lens to heritage studies, offering a nuanced model that reconciles the often-opposed goals of authenticity and adaptation. The findings provide practical advice to cultural practitioners, educators, and policymakers tasked with stewarding traditional arts into the future, suggesting that the key to longevity lies not in stasis, but in principled evolution.

## 2 REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The concept of authenticity in cultural heritage is multifaceted and has been extensively studied across various contexts, including tourism, heritage conservation, and intangible cultural heritage (ICH). Authenticity can be understood through different dimensions: objective (real), constructed (sociopolitical), and personal (phenomenological) (Jamal & Hill, 2004; 2013). These elements are essential for contextualizing history within the spatial and temporal frameworks that define the lived experiences of both tourists and residents. In the context of ICH, authenticity is crucial for promoting community cohesiveness and communal identity, exemplified by the Festa do Boi in Galicia, Spain (Rodríguez Campo *et al.*, 2024). This tradition improves both the objective and existential aspects of authenticity, which leads to better emotional experiences and happier communities. However, UNESCO contends that the concept of authenticity is not applicable to ICH, pointing out that it is a valid instrument to measure tourists' subjective perceptions (Liu, Y *et al.*, 2024).

Authenticity is also crucial in the field of adaptive heritage reuse. Successful adaptive reuse can impart heritage sites new meaning, help them last longer, and boost tourism (Tu, 2020). For example, actions that build museum-like structures while keeping

cultural value preserve the authenticity of industrial history (Samadzadehyazdi *et al.*, 2020).

To keep legacy sites authentic, heritage conservation must strike a balance between using technology and maintaining cultural authenticity. AI-driven preservation solutions have demonstrated elevated success rates in pattern recognition and oral history preservation, attaining considerable cultural fidelity and diminishing processing duration (Fu *et al.* 2025). This method presents a framework for balancing technology intervention with cultural authenticity, ensuring community engagement and intellectual property protection.

In general, authenticity in cultural heritage is a complicated and ever-changing idea that needs to be thought about carefully in terms of different aspects and situations to make sure that communities and visitors have meaningful experiences and that it is managed in a way that lasts.

Critical heritage studies have intensely scrutinized the notion of authenticity. Laurajane Smith's (2006) notion of 'approved heritage discourse' attacks the hierarchical, material-centric methodology of preservation that frequently marginalizes intangible and community-oriented practices. This creates a tension with the dynamic character of ICH, where, as Marontate (2005) argues, rigorous conservation can hasten irrelevance. Our research expands upon this critique by introducing 'adaptive authenticity' as a community- and practitioner-focused framework for addressing this specific tension.

Academic discourse has extensively examined the preservation and modernization of traditional performing arts, particularly in relation to cultural heritage and globalization. Research like Gibbs (2018) provides a full picture of how traditional Chinese arts confront modern problems, focusing on the conflict between staying true to their roots and meeting modern tastes. This tension is especially strong in regional operas like Nanjing Baiju, where local identity and larger cultural trends come together.

Historical research on Chinese opera frequently emphasizes prominent styles such as Peking Opera or Kunqu, resulting in insufficient examination of regional variants like Nanjing Baiju. Works like Chua (2019) and Ward (1979) look at the artistic and ritualistic sides of these art forms, but they don't go into much detail about how they adapt. For example, Ward (1979) looks at the symbolic meanings in traditional performances, but it doesn't look at how these meanings change when modern music is added. This gap

emphasizes the necessity for targeted research on regional operas and their distinctive adaptation processes.

China is not the only country that is modernizing its traditional arts. Comparative studies, such as Mackerras (1999), demonstrate analogous challenges in various cultural contexts, where traditional forms must harmonize with contemporary aesthetics to maintain relevance. The case of Nanjing Baiju Opera, on the other hand, is different because it is linked to Nanjing's silk industry and almost died out in the 20th century. The revival efforts described in Huizhu (2009) show how community and policy efforts can bring endangered art forms back to life. However, these efforts often run the risk of losing their original meaning through too much commercialization.

Studies on how audiences react to traditional arts, like the ones mentioned in Mackerras (2013), show that younger people are less likely to enjoy them than older people. Media from around the world influences younger people, who often favor new ideas that align with current musical trends. Older people, on the other hand, tend to resist changes to tradition. This division is especially clear in the case of Nanjing Baiju Opera, where changes like turning "Xian Hua Diao" into "Mo Li Hua" have caused strong reactions on both sides. The function of education in closing this divide, as posited by Yan and Li (2023), is still inadequately examined within the realm of regional operas.

There are also many different ways to study traditional arts. Some researchers, such as Bresler and Stake (2017), support ethnographic and participatory methods, whereas others utilize structured music analysis, as demonstrated by Lewin (2007). The latter approach is particularly pertinent to this study, as it facilitates a comprehensive analysis of melodic, rhythmic, and harmonic transformations in Nanjing Baiju Opera. However, integrating this with audience surveys, as suggested by DiMaggio *et al.* (1978), yields a more comprehensive understanding of the perception and reception of adaptations.

The current literature demonstrates a disjointed comprehension of how regional operas, such as Nanjing Baiju, adapt to contemporary influences. Although extensive research exists on cultural preservation and audience reception, there is a scarcity of studies that investigate the particular musical and socio-cultural mechanisms facilitating the evolution of these art forms while maintaining their identity.

This study expands upon these foundations by providing a comprehensive case analysis of Nanjing Baiju Opera, emphasizing its musical adaptations and

intergenerational reception. This study offers nuanced insights into how one art form navigates the competing demands of tradition and modernity, in contrast to prior works that either generalize across traditional arts or neglect regional specifics. By combining historical analysis, musical analysis, and audience feedback, the study provides a more complete framework for understanding how cultural preservation works in practice.

## **2.1 Theoretical framework: reconceptualizing authenticity for living heritage**

To protect intangible cultural assets, we need to go beyond the idea of preserving and innovating. This research introduces the concept of "Adaptive Authenticity" to examine the evolution of traditional arts, such as Nanjing Baiju Opera, while preserving their cultural integrity. This paradigm is constructed by evaluating and integrating current discourses on authenticity within heritage studies. The idea of authenticity has always been important to cultural protection. It is based on ideas of originality, material integrity, and historical accuracy (UNESCO, 2003). This goal of "gold-standard" authenticity often leads to a museumification approach, where history is considered a fragile artifact that needs to be protected against alteration (Smith, 2006). This viewpoint is inadequate for intangible cultural legacy, which is fundamentally performative, dynamic, and reliant on ongoing community practice. Marontate (2005) contends that inflexible conservation measures may accidentally result in cultural stagnation, diminishing the relevance of heritage to modern life and hastening its deterioration.

In reaction, constructivist perspectives have emerged, asserting that authenticity is not an intrinsic characteristic but a socially negotiated value attributed by individuals according to their beliefs, expectations, and settings (Wang, 1999). This revision recognizes that the definition of "authentic" can evolve and vary throughout groups, as seen by the generational disparity in audience reception of traditional arts. Although this perspective effectively elucidates the subjective feeling of authenticity, it provides less practical assistance for practitioners on how to modify a tradition without precipitating its fundamental breakdown. The concept of "strategic glocalization" in cultural studies reconciles these two viewpoints, positing that global influences are frequently tailored to local circumstances, yielding distinctive hybrid forms (Hebert & Rykowski, 2018). In musicology, the concepts of "etic" (outsider/analytical) and "emic" (insider/cultural)

viewpoints elucidate the distinction between structural changes and perceived meaning (Nettl, 2005). We integrate these insights to construct the "Adaptive Authenticity" model.

## **2.2 Defining adaptive authenticity**

Adaptive authenticity is a process-oriented framework that argues for the strategic and conscious adaptation of a cultural form, where its continued viability is secured by distinguishing between its core and peripheral elements.

The Core represents the fundamental, non-negotiable elements that constitute the identity and essential character of the art form. These are the signifiers that practitioners and cultural insiders recognize as the "soul" of the tradition. For Nanjing Baiju, this could include its foundational pentatonic melodic language, specific lyrical themes tied to Nanjing's history, and characteristic vocal production techniques.

The periphery encompasses the adaptable elements related to performance practice, instrumentation, and presentation. Modifying these aspects can enhance accessibility, aesthetic appeal, or relevance for new audiences without compromising the core identity. Examples include rhythmic structures, the use of electronic instruments, and staging techniques.

This framework does not see authenticity as a fixed state but as an outcome of a successful negotiation. A performance is "authentically adaptive" when its core elements are preserved and respected, even as its peripheral elements are innovated. This elucidates why younger audiences may regard a contemporary rendition of "Mo Li Hua" as authentic, given that its fundamental melody and cultural implications are preserved, whereas older generations, who equate authenticity with the retention of all original performance practices (core and periphery), perceive the same adaptation as a divergence. This study utilizes this approach to analyze the evolution of Nanjing Baiju and its audience reception data, shifting the inquiry from whether change is acceptable to elucidating how certain alterations might be controlled to secure the art form's sustainable future.

### 3 METHODS

This study employs a secondary analysis of qualitative data, applying the novel theoretical framework of "adaptive authenticity" to findings from a prior case study on Nanjing Baiju Opera (Wu & Mohammed, 2024). Rather than collecting new primary data, this research re-examines the existing historical, musical, and receptional data from the aforementioned study through a new conceptual lens. This approach is well-suited for conducting in-depth theoretical and contextual analyses that build upon established empirical findings (Borin & Donato, 2020). The original study utilized a triangulation strategy, combining historical documentation analysis, structured musical examination, and audience perception surveys, which provides a comprehensive picture of how the art form has changed over time (Drotner, 2019; Yarbrough, 2003). This secondary analysis cross-references these pre-existing findings to enhance the validity and robustness of the new theoretical conclusions.

#### 3.1 Historical documentation analysis

The historical trajectory of Nanjing Baiju was reconstructed in a study by Wu & Mohammed (2024) through a thorough analysis of historical documents, archival data, and existing literature. This historical context, as established in the primary source, is crucial for understanding the "inviolable core" and "adaptive periphery" of the art form. This involved looking into historical documents, performance records, and scholarly works that talked about the art form's beginnings, growth, and social and political context. This method allowed for the reconstruction of the historical trajectory of Nanjing Baiju, identifying periods of flourishing, near-extinction, and revival efforts. The study utilized the methods of historical research, which frequently entail the analysis of government records and historiography (Kaiser, 2008), to comprehend the factors influencing the opera's evolution.

#### 3.2 Structured musical examination

The primary study's core component was a structured musical examination, focusing on the evolution from "Xian Hua Diao" to "Mo Li Hua." This research re-

analyzes their documented findings regarding melodic, rhythmic, and harmonic transformations.

Musical analysis, a subdiscipline of musicology, aims to discern internal coherence and scrutinize the internal structure of a musical composition, elucidating the interrelations among its components (Andersen, 2017). The investigation methodically examined melodic scales or contours, rhythms, and the application of literary texts (Mohammed, 2021; 2016).

By applying the "adaptive authenticity" framework to their structured analytical techniques, this secondary analysis dissects how specific musical elements were preserved or adapted. The study sought to analyze how some musical aspects have been retained as fundamental components or modified as secondary parts, thereby implementing the notion of "adaptive authenticity" within a musical framework (Charles, 2018).

### **3.3 Audience perception surveys**

To understand the impact of modernization on reception, the study on Nanjing Bayou (Wu & Mohammed, 2024) employed audience perception surveys. This secondary analysis utilizes their published survey data on how different generations perceive the authenticity and appeal of both traditional and modernized versions. This study utilized audience perception surveys to comprehend the influence of modernization on the reception of Nanjing Baiju Opera. This qualitative approach entailed collecting data regarding the perceptions of various generations concerning the authenticity and attractiveness of both classic and modernized renditions of the opera. Surveys and maybe semi-structured interviews were employed to investigate audience perceptions on aspects such as electronic instruments, rhythmic variations, and voice styles (Mohammed, 2016). The theme analysis of qualitative interview data, shown in studies delineating cultural heritage concepts (Zhu *et al.*, 2023), elucidated the complexities of audience responses. This approach helps to observe differences in how different generations see things and to assess if strategically changing peripheral parts really does bridge cultural and generational gaps without making the art form seem less authentic. The thematic analysis of qualitative interview data, as presented in the original study, revealed the nuances of audience responses.

## 4 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### 4.1 The inviolable core of Nanjing Baiju

The historical trajectory of Nanjing Baiju Opera reveals not just a series of adaptations but a consistent, resilient core, as defined by our adaptive authenticity framework, that has withstood centuries of socio-political upheaval. We identify these enduring elements as the art form's inviolable core. People and communities have naturally protected these essential parts, even while changing other less important aspects to stay alive and relevant.

This core consists of three principal dimensions: its foundational musical structure, its thematic and lyrical identity, and its distinctive vocal and instrumental timbre.

First, the pentatonic melodic framework constitutes the structural bedrock of Nanjing Baiju's core. Despite the evolution from the improvisational "Xian Hua Diao" to the standardized "Mo Li Hua," the repertoire has unwaveringly maintained a pentatonic foundation (Lu-Ting & Kuo-Huang, 1982). This is not merely a musical scale but a deep-seated aesthetic principle that aligns with the linguistic tonality of the Nanjing dialect and the broader Chinese musical psyche.

The musical evolution from 'Xian Hua Diao' to 'Mo Li Hua' provides a clear blueprint for the strategic adaptation of the adaptive periphery. While the specific, detailed comparative data on melodic, rhythmic, and instrumental changes has been previously documented (Wu & Mohammed, 2024, pp. 214-215, Tables 2 & 3), its significance is reinterpreted here through the lens of adaptive authenticity. The changes are not random modernizations but deliberate, strategic choices targeting specific peripheral elements. The following section (4.2) will demonstrate, using the specific example of the 'Xian Hua Diao' to 'Mo Li Hua' transformation, how successful modernizations have strategically adapted elements *outside* of this core. A detailed table (Table 1) will frame this analysis, categorizing the documented musical changes according to the adaptive authenticity framework.

As evidenced in the musical analysis (Wu & Mohammed, 2024), while harmonies have been added and rhythms regularized, the essential melodic contours, the descending fourth leaps, and the narrow-range oscillations characteristic of early Baiju (Zhang &

Jiang, 2021) remain intact in the modern "Mo Li Hua." This persistence suggests that the pentatonic system is a primary carrier of the art form's "Chineseness" and regional identity; to alter it fundamentally would be to sever the music from its historical and cultural roots. Its preservation across dynasties, political regimes, and modernization campaigns marks it as a cornerstone of the authentic Baiju experience.

Second, the lyrical themes rooted in the social fabric of Nanjing form the narrative core of the art form. The repertoire consistently functions as a living archive of local experience. From the depiction of artisan hardships in *Ji Fang Ku* to the celebration of Nanjing's landscapes in *Jin Ling Bian Di Jing*, the stories are intrinsically tied to the city's geography, industries, and customs (Berling, 1985; M. Chen *et al.*, 2021). This focus on hyper-local, vernacular narratives or the "voice of the silk workers," is what distinguished Baiju from court-sponsored arts and continues to be its source of cultural significance. Even modern creations like *She Qu Nian Nian Xin Qi* maintain this core function by chronicling contemporary community life in Nanjing, demonstrating that the core is not static content but a persistent *focus* on local, socially grounded storytelling. The core identity of Baiju is thus not a specific story, but its role as a musical chronicler of the Nanjing people's lived reality.

Finally, the distinctive vocal production and the timbre of key traditional instruments like the *sheng* mouth organ represent the timbral core of the opera. Historical records note that the high-pitched falsetto and rapid tonal transitions became standardized during the Qianlong era (Yu, 2007), creating an immediately identifiable vocal signature. Similarly, the sounds of the *sheng* and the *dizi* are not merely accompaniments but are acoustically intertwined with the vocal line, creating a characteristic heterophonic texture (Thrasher, 2023). While modern adaptations may reduce nasal resonance or add electronic backing, the preservation of these specific instrumental voices in performances deemed "authentic" by traditionalists indicates their status as core elements. They provide the unique "soundscape" of Baiju, an auditory fingerprint that connects directly to its origins in the workshops of Nanjing's silk district. This timbral core is the sensory embodiment of the tradition.

In conclusion, the historical resilience of Nanjing Baiju Opera can be attributed to the conscious and unconscious protection of this inviolable core. The pentatonic structure provides musical authenticity, the Nanjing-centric themes provide narrative authenticity, and the distinctive timbre provides sensory authenticity. Understanding this core is the

essential first step in the process of adaptive authenticity. It establishes the boundary within which innovation can safely occur; changes that respect this core are perceived as evolution, while those that violate it risk being rejected as a loss of essence.

#### 4.2 Analysis of the adaptive periphery in 'Mo Li Hua'

The musical evolution from "Xian Hua Diao" to "Mo Li Hua" provides a clear blueprint for the strategic adaptation of the adaptive periphery. While the detailed comparative data has been previously documented (Wu & Syed Mohammed, 2024, pp. 214-215), its significance is reinterpreted here through the lens of adaptive authenticity. The changes are not random modernizations but deliberate, strategic choices targeting specific peripheral elements—rhythm, instrumentation, and harmony—to ensure contemporary relevance while the inviolable core remains sacrosanct. The success of this transformation lies in the fact that these peripheral adaptations serve as a bridge, making the core melody and its cultural significance accessible to new audiences.

To frame this analysis, Table 1 below re-categorizes the documented musical changes not just as "evolution," but as a conscious strategy of distinguishing between the protected core and the adapted periphery.

**Table 1**

*Strategic Adaptation in the 'Xian Hua Diao' to 'Mo Li Hua' Transformation: An 'Adaptive Authenticity' Analysis*

Musical Element	Status in 'Adaptive Authenticity' Framework	Specific Adaptation (as documented in Wu & Mohammed, 2024)	Strategic Function of the Adaptation
Pentatonic Melody	Inviolable Core	Preserved across all versions, from Late Qing to Modern.	The piece maintains fundamental cultural and aesthetic identity, the non-negotiable "soul" of the piece.
Lyrical Theme (Jasmine Flower)	Inviolable Core	Retained as the central subject.	It ensures continuity of cultural narrative and symbolic meaning.
Rhythmic Structure	Adaptive Periphery	Irregular 2/4 meter → Standardized 4/4 meter →	Aligns with global popular music conventions to enhance accessibility and rhythmic

Musical Element	Status 'Adaptive Authenticity' Framework	in	Specific Adaptation (as documented in Wu & Mohammed, 2024)	Strategic Function of the Adaptation
			Syncopated backbeats.	predictability for modern listeners.
Instrumentation	Adaptive Periphery		<i>Pipa</i> , <i>dizi</i> → + <i>yangqin</i> , <i>erhu</i> → + electronic synthesizers, drums.	The composition expands the timbral palette to sound "contemporary" and uses familiar modern sounds to frame and highlight the traditional core melody.
Harmonic Language	Adaptive Periphery		Monophonic texture → Simple tertian harmonies → Jazz- influenced chords.	Adds emotional depth and harmonic direction expected by audiences accustomed to Western music theory, preventing perceptions of "thinness."
Vocal Production	Conditional Periphery		Nasal production → Mixed head-chest voice → Belting technique.	The singer adapts their vocal style to contemporary singing aesthetics while striving to maintain linguistic clarity and melodic integrity.

First, the rhythmic transformation is a clear adaptation of the periphery to align with contemporary auditory habits. The shift from a flexible, speech-informed 2/4 meter to a steady 4/4 meter with a backbeat (Wu & Mohammed, 2024) moves the piece from a folk idiom to the structure of a modern lyrical song or pop ballad (Gioia, 2006). This strategic change makes the temporal flow of the music familiar and predictable to an ear conditioned by global media. Crucially, this peripheral adaptation succeeds because it provides a new structural vessel for the core pentatonic melody, which remains perfectly intact and recognizable.

Second, the strategic expansion of instrumentation demonstrates how the periphery can be used to frame the core. The incorporation of electronic synthesizers and drum machines (Wu & Mohammed, 2024) creates a soundscape that signals "modernity." However, this is not a replacement. As spectral analyses suggest (Lao, 2025), the traditional instruments like the *dizi* or *sheng* are often foregrounded to carry the melody. The modern electronic elements thus act as a supportive pad, a peripheral soundscape designed to make the core timbre of the traditional instruments feel fresh and exciting rather than antiquated. This is a tactical use of periphery to enhance, not erase, the core.

Finally, the introduction of Western harmonic language is a profound yet carefully managed adaptation of the periphery. The addition of chord progressions addresses a common barrier for new audiences—the unfamiliarity with monophonic texture. By providing harmonic support, arrangers create a sense of emotional trajectory that resonates with listeners steeped in Western musical conventions (Nettl, 1986). This adaptation strategically builds the harmonies *around* the core pentatonic melody. The melody's integrity dictates the harmony, not the other way around, ensuring the piece's essential "Chineseness" is preserved.

The "adaptive authenticity" framework analysis concludes that "Mo Li Hua" undergoes highly calculated changes. The peripheral elements, such as rhythm, instrumentation, and harmony, are the primary sites for innovation precisely because they can be altered without destroying the art form's identity. Their adaptation serves a clear strategic function: to build an accessible bridge for contemporary audiences. The enduring appeal of "Mo Li Hua" proves that the preservation of the inviolable core is what allows the periphery to be so flexibly and successfully adapted, ensuring the melody composed by Nanjing's silk workers centuries ago continues to resonate in the modern world.

### **4.3 Audience reception as validation**

The generational divide in audience reception, previously documented as a primary finding (Wu & Syed Mohammed, 2024, p. 216), transcends mere demographic variation. When analyzed through the framework of adaptive authenticity, this divide transforms into compelling evidence that validates the core-periphery adaptation strategy. The survey data does not simply show that younger audiences prefer modern versions; it demonstrates that they accept and perceive as authentic a version of the art form where the periphery has been strategically adapted, precisely because the inviolable core remains intact. Conversely, the resistance from older audiences underscores their deeper connection to the *entire* historical package, including what this model would classify as peripheral elements.

The paper's survey revealed a stark contrast: 78% of respondents under 40 expressed positive attitudes toward modernized elements like electronic instrumentation, compared to only 32% of those over 60 (Wu & Syed Mohammed, 2024). This

discrepancy is not a failure of cultural transmission but a validation of the adaptive process. For younger demographics, whose musical palates are shaped by globalized, digital media, the adapted periphery—the 4/4 rhythm, harmonic depth, and contemporary timbres—functions as a crucial accessibility tool. It aligns with their existing aesthetic schemas, lowering the barrier to entry. The critical finding, however, is that this accessibility does not come at the cost of cultural perception. The same survey indicated that a significant majority of young respondents perceived the modern "Mo Li Hua" as authentically Chinese. This confirms that their perception of authenticity is anchored in the core elements - the pentatonic melody and the iconic "Jasmine Flower" theme, which have been successfully preserved. The modern periphery makes the timeless core legible for them.

Qualitative data from the survey further illuminates this validation. Younger participants described traditional performances as "inaccessible" or "stylistically distant," while praising modern versions for their "emotional resonance" and "production quality." This feedback indicates that the traditional *peripheral* presentation (e.g., nasal vocal style, monophonic texture) was a barrier. The adaptation of these peripheral elements did not destroy the artwork but removed the barrier, allowing the core's beauty to shine through for a new generation. Their acceptance is a direct endorsement of the adaptive authenticity approach.

For older audiences, the definition of authenticity is more holistic, encompassing the entire performance practice, including peripheral elements like instrumentation and vocal style. Their preference for purist versions is not a rejection of the core melody but a testament to their deep familiarity with the *complete* traditional soundscape. Their resistance highlights the sensitivity involved in adapting the periphery; changes must be deliberate and respectful to avoid alienating traditional custodians. However, their steadfast connection also reinforces the paramount importance of never compromising the core, as it is the ultimate source of the art form's identity for all generations.

Therefore, the audience reception data serves as a powerful empirical validation of the adaptive authenticity model. The strong acceptance of modern "Mo Li Hua" by younger audiences proves that the strategy of innovating on the periphery to safeguard the core is an effective method for sustaining intangible cultural heritage. It demonstrates that authenticity is not monolithic but can be strategically negotiated. The "divide" is not

a problem to be solved but a natural outcome of a successful adaptation strategy that ensures the art form's core cultural significance can traverse generational boundaries.

## **5 DISCUSSION: ADAPTIVE AUTHENTICITY AS A FRAMEWORK FOR SUSTAINABLE HERITAGE**

The empirical findings from the Nanjing Baiju case study do more than just document a successful adaptation; they challenge the fundamental terms of the debate surrounding intangible cultural heritage (ICH). The literature frequently portrays the future of traditional arts as a binary decision between archival preservation and potentially damaging modernization (Gibbs, 2018; Mackerras, 2013). As our findings demonstrate, the adaptive authenticity model resolves this impasse. The case of Nanjing Baiju shows that sustainability is achieved not by choosing *between* tradition and modernity, but by intelligently managing their relationship through the core/periphery distinction.

### **5.1 Transcending the theoretical binary**

The value of this model lies in its ability to dissolve the abstract tension described in the literature into a set of concrete, actionable questions. The critical issue is no longer *whether* to change, but *what* can be changed and *how*. Our case study shows that solving this issue is not the goal, but rather a sign of successful negotiation. The generational divide in reception proves that authenticity is not monolithic but is contingent on the perceived integrity of the core. For a new generation, authenticity resides in the melodic and narrative essence; for traditionalists, it is embedded in the entire historical performance practice. The model acknowledges this pluralism and provides a framework for managing it, moving the discourse from conflict to strategic coexistence.

### **5.2 From analysis to action: practical implications**

This reconceptualization leads to pragmatic recommendations that shift the focus of preservation efforts from outcome-based judgments to process-oriented strategies.

For practitioners: The primary implication is the need for a deliberate process of "heritage diagnostics." Before innovation, the artistic community must engage in a

critical self-assessment to identify the core elements that constitute their art form's unique identity. This process transforms adaptation from an ad hoc reaction to a principled practice. For example, a music director can now justify the use of a synthesizer by demonstrating how it amplifies, rather than replaces, the core timbre of the *sheng*, making a strategic choice instead of a speculative gamble.

For policymakers: The model argues for a shift in funding criteria. Support should be directed towards projects that demonstrate a sophisticated understanding of the core/periphery distinction, moving beyond the binary of "pure preservation" and "radical innovation." Grants may be given to projects that explain what is being changed, why, and how the core will be protected and passed on. This encourages evidence-based, culturally grounded innovation that is accountable to the art form's history rather than merely to contemporary market trends.

### **5.3 A Model for wider application**

The concept of "adaptive authenticity" probably applies to much more than just Nanjing Baiju. The problems this regional opera faces are similar to those that many other ICH forms around the world are dealing with. For example, the worldwide resurgence of Kunqu Opera involved making performances shorter and faster (a peripheral adaptation of duration and pacing) while keeping its complicated vocal techniques and poetic language (its core). In the same way, Japanese Noh theater has modernized by trying out new subjects (peripheral story adaptation) but still keeping its rigid choreographic and musical conventions (core). This indicates that the core/periphery paradigm is not a singular answer but a flexible analytical framework applicable for diagnosing difficulties and formulating sustainability strategies for traditional arts globally, ranging from Italian opera to West African drumming.

## **6 CONCLUSION**

This study has demonstrated that the sustainable preservation of intangible cultural heritage requires a paradigm shift from the preservation-innovation binary to the framework of 'adaptive authenticity.' The case of Nanjing Baiju Opera illustrates that viability is not attained through stagnation or uncoordinated modernization, but rather

through a deliberate process of differentiating between an inviolable core—the fundamental components that constitute the art form's essential identity—and an adaptive periphery, the stylistic and presentation aspects that can be judiciously revised to reconcile generational and cultural divides. The fact that younger people like the modern "Mo Li Hua" while traditionalists prefer purer forms is not a sign that the transmission is failing but rather a sign that this paradigm is working. It shows that authenticity is something that can be agreed upon, based on the stability of the core, which lets the periphery change throughout time as a way to attract people involved. This model has very useful effects. It provides practitioners a clear order to first go through a diagnostic procedure to determine the essence of their art form before coming up with new ideas. It also tells policymakers to back projects that show this strategic understanding. "Adaptive authenticity" presents communities an organized way to confront change, which helps them confidently cope with modernity. This makes sure that evolution is an intentional act of cultural stewardship rather than a response to market demands.

### **6.1 Avenues for future research**

Future studies ought to concentrate on evaluating and enhancing this model. Some promising directions include:

1. Comparative studies: Utilizing the "adaptive authenticity" framework to evaluate other regional operas (e.g., Yue Opera, Kunqu) and various ICH forms (e.g., craft practices, folk dances) to determine its broader application and to identify context-specific modifications.
2. Longitudinal audience research: Monitoring the perception of authenticity across various age groups over time to comprehend the evolution and consolidation of acceptance regarding peripheral adaptations.
3. Digital adaptation: Investigating how the core/periphery model can facilitate the incorporation of digital technologies and virtual performance spaces while preserving the embodied essence of live tradition.
4. Policy analysis: Examining the alignment or contradiction of current cultural heritage policies with the principles of adaptive authenticity and suggesting new policy mechanisms informed by models.

In conclusion, the journey of Nanjing Baiju Opera illustrates that the future of traditional arts lies not in resistance to change, but in the intelligent and respectful management of it. The "adaptive authenticity" framework provides the conceptual tools for this management, offering a sustainable path forward where the past informs the present, and the core ensures that even as the periphery adapts, the soul of the tradition endures.

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### **Authors' Contribution**

All authors contributed equally to the development of this article.

### **Data availability**

All datasets relevant to this study's findings are fully available within the article.

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